Rare John Virgin Family Items Returned to Fairbury

By: Dale C. Maley
For: FairburyNews.net
Date: January 5, 2026

John Virgin (1838-1900) was one of Fairbury's most prominent citizens. He was a Civil War veteran and married Serepta Jane "Jennie" McDowell, who was a member of the well-known pioneer McDowell family. John imported French Percheron horses and sold them to local farmers. He was active in the Fairbury Fair and the Illinois State Fair, and the Governor appointed him to organize the agricultural exhibit at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, also known as the Chicago World's Fair.

Around 1910, John Virgin's widow, Serepta Virgin, took a box of family keepsakes with her when she moved to California with her daughter. This box traveled to six states over the next 115 years and was returned to the Fairbury Echoes Museum by Betsy Howell in 2025. Analysis of this box revealed a treasure trove of rare historical documents.

During the Civil War, soldiers often carried a very small Bible with them. John Virgin carried one of these small Bibles with him during the War. In his 1860 Bible, he wrote on the front page, "1864 – Carried by John Virgin thru the War of 61: The Rebellion. "On the back page, he wrote, "If any man should find this book, please send it to her, Y. P. Virgin, Pontiac, Livingston County, Illinois. The property of John Virgin, a volunteer in the service of the United States at Fairbury, IL. August 20, 1861."

Soldiers often wrote a note like this in their Bibles so that in the event the Bible was lost or they were killed, the Bible could be returned to the soldier's relatives. The mysterious thing about John's notation was that there was no Y. P. Virgin in his family tree. His mother was Lucinda Virgin.

In 1861, right before John Virgin entered the Union Army, he bought a beautiful photo album for his girlfriend. Inside the front cover, he wrote, "From John Virgin to Jennie McDowell, 1861." Jennie began filling the photo album immediately, and she first put in Civil War-era photographs of John Virgin and herself. She also included old tintype photos of her male relatives dressed in their Civil War uniforms. Jennie continued to fill this photo album with about 50 photographs taken between 1861 and 1900.

Also in the photo album is a beautiful photo of the John Virgin family with his three surviving daughters. There are also photos of the two daughters who died at ages 15 and 27.

Many soldiers also often carried a small photograph of their wife or girlfriend. John Virgin carried a small picture of his girlfriend, "Jennie" McDowell, which was taken at DeLong's Gallery on Locust Street in Fairbury, Illinois.

John Virgin apparently accidentally lost the photo of his girlfriend on the battlefield. At a later date, another soldier found this photograph and, years later, returned it to John Virgin in Fairbury. This soldier likely traced the owner back to Fairbury because the picture was taken at DeLong's Gallery in Fairbury. This soldier wrote a small note identifying his unit and the date he found the lost photograph on the battlefield.
Two rare documents from John Virgin's Civil War service were preserved in this box. The first document is from 1863, when John Virgin was promoted to the position of Orderly Sergeant. In that era, the Orderly Sergeant was the senior non-commissioned officer responsible for the company's administrative duties—keeping roll books, recording daily orders, reporting the company's status, overseeing discipline, preparing reports, and relaying officers' orders to enlisted men.

The second document was John Virgin's 1864 discharge paper from the Union Army, following his three-year enlistment. John Virgin returned to Fairbury after the War, and he married Jennie McDowell in 1865. John was 26, and Jennie was 22 when they got married. They had five girls, whom they named Georgia Annie Virgin, Minnie Alice Virgin, Alta Zeo Virgin, and Daisy Dean Virgin. Georgia Virgin died in 1881 at the age of 15, and Alta Zeo Virgin died in 1897 at the age of 27.

From the end of the Civil War until the 1880s, John Virgin imported Percheron horses from France and sold them to Fairbury area farmers. He built his “Horse Palace” to house the horses. It was located across the alley to the north of where the Walton building is today. He often entered some of his Percheron horses in the State Fairs at Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska. His entries usually won first prize at these state fairs. John Virgin created a business card with an artist's illustration of one of his prize-winning Percheron horse teams. Using modern software, this old black-and-white business card yielded a gorgeous colorized photo of his winning Percheron horse team.

John Virgin was a member of the Illinois State Board of Agriculture. Members of this board and their wives were granted annual free passes to ride the TP&W passenger trains. Some of these yearly passes for John and his wife for 1891 and 1892 were included in the box of family treasures.

Because of his prominence in Illinois agricultural affairs, the Governor of Illinois appointed John Virgin of Fairbury to create the Agricultural Exhibit at the 1893 Columbian Exposition (Chicago World’s Fair). Because of his role in this event, he was issued a free pass to enter the fair every day. His free pass is included in the box of family treasures.

An 1897 document was included in the box. It is the membership certificate for John Virgin as a member of the GAR. The GAR was a social club created initially for surviving members of the Civil War. It was the forerunner of the American Legion group that exists today. He was a founding member of the Fairbury GAR group.

Unfortunately, Alta Zeo Virgin, the 27-year-old daughter of John Virgin, died unexpectedly of tuberculosis of the bowels. This disease was a fatal infection of the

intestinal tract caused by TB, which produced long-term gastrointestinal symptoms and ultimately led to death due to complications like obstruction, hemorrhage, or widespread infection. In that era, invitations were sent to people to attend a funeral. One of these invitations for the funeral of Alta Zeo Virgin was included in the box of family treasures.

John Virgin was a member and officer in the National French Horse Association because of his business of importing Percheron horses. Among the effects in the box of family treasures is his invitation to attend the 1900 meeting of this association in Chicago. John Virgin attended this meeting and became ill just as the membership was about to vote on whether to re-elect him as Vice-President of this association. John Virgin was taken backstage while the voting continued. Unfortunately, he died backstage while the membership voted for him to continue to serve as Vice-President. John Virgin was 62 when he died in November 1900 in Chicago.

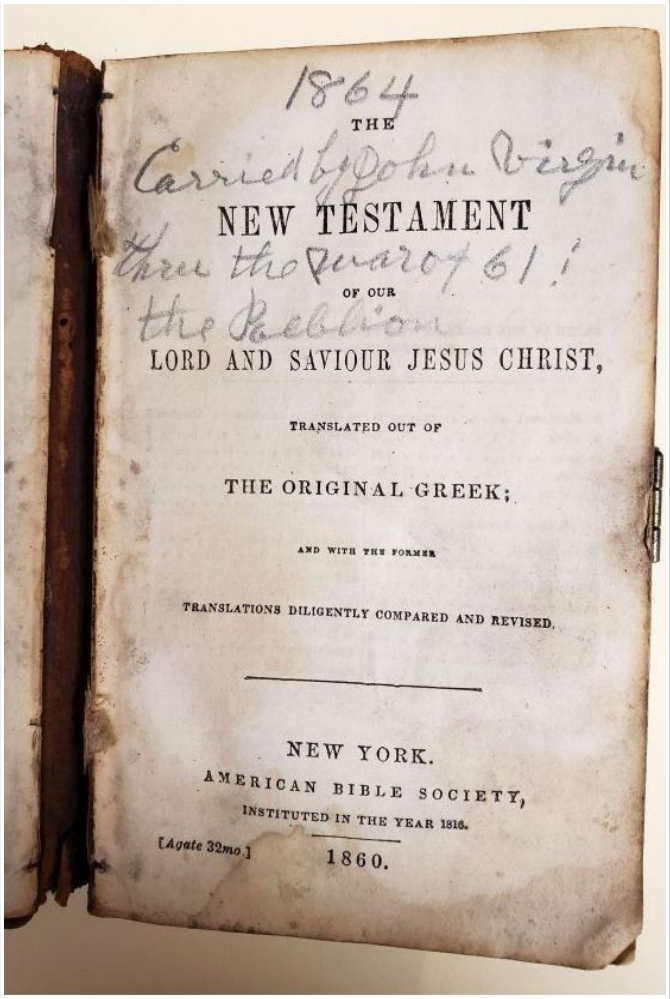
Congress eventually passed a law awarding pensions to widows of men who served in the Civil War. Among the effects in the box of family treasures is the pension certificate awarded to Jennie Virgin in 1908.

Jennie Virgin moved to California with one of her daughters after John Virgin's death. She died in 1935 at the age of 93. An obituary for her was published in a California newspaper.

One Fairbury mystery is how the name Fairbury was chosen in 1857, when the village was founded. Alma Lewis James was a Fairbury historian who published her history book titled Stuffed Clubs and Antimaccassars in 1967. In her book, Alma stated that she was unable to determine why the name of Fairbury was chosen.

In the California obit for Jennie McDowell, it was reported, "Her family were pioneers in Fairbury, and it was by their suggestion that the town derived its name." Jennie was a member of the McDowell family, one of the pioneer settlers who arrived in the Fairbury area. Someone in the McDowell family likely suggested the name of Fairbury for the new village.

Many thanks go to Betsy Howell for saving this precious box of John Virgin family artifacts and shipping it from Washington state to the Fairbury Echoes Museum. All of the rare documents found in the box have been scanned and saved as digital files on Archive.org so descendants or researchers can easily find them in the future. These documents are a valuable part of Fairbury's history.



The small 1860 Bible that John Virgin carried with him during the Civil War. On the front page, he wrote, "Carried by John Virgin thru the War of 61: the Rebellion."